

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work In Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

You've probably heard about the digital gap or digital divide in the US. For US Latinos, that gap is significant. According to the Pew Research Center, 80% of whites are connected to broadband internet while only 65% of Latinos are. And Latinos may get less encouragement to seek digital training or jobs requiring digital skills. That digital disparity means Latinos as a group face more challenges when job-seeking. Without a high level of digital skills, Latinos and others are increasingly shut out of career opportunities. At the JFF Horizons Conference in July, I spoke with two leaders who are trying to close the digital gap for Latinos. Frankie Miranda, President and CEO of the Hispanic Federation, and Mauricio Garcia, Senior Vice President of Programs for UnidosUS. Frankie Miranda spoke about how the Hispanic Federation has built a coalition to help upskill the diverse US Latino community to provide tech skills they'll need to access jobs of the future.

The Latino workforce, it is already 19% of the workforce, but by 2030, 78% of the growth is going to be coming from the Latino worker. So tell me, where are we at in terms of upskilling and making sure that that workforce has all the skills they need for today's jobs?

Frankie Miranda, Hispanic Federation CEO:

I think that we are in the right direction, but there is still so much that we need to do. We know that more than half of Latino, Latinx, Latina workers do not have the digital skills required for the jobs of the future. And that goes between basic to mid-level digital skilling. We're still not talking about the under-representation of Latinos in the tech industry. So while there is an incredible movement starting and that there is a coalition of organizations and funders coming together and we are starting the conversation, there's still a long way to go.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What is behind that gap? Has it been a lack of opportunity or awareness?

Frankie Miranda, Hispanic Federation CEO:

I think that for our community, it's important that we provide opportunities that are culturally competent, that are linguistically competent regardless if a Latino, Latina, Latina person has been here for generations or the newly arrived. Most of the opportunities that need to be created needs to happen in communities where people live through the organizations that are the trusted messengers in their communities. And that is why the Federation and member agencies have started to work together even before the pandemic since 2019 on upskilling the Latino workforce through many organizations in community. We started with 20 organizations in 2019, and now we have 51 organizations in 20 states and also in Puerto Rico working to address this issue.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When we talk about the Latino workforce or population in general, what I think is important in my mind to recognize is it's not just one community. There are people from El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Mexico, you name it, there's a lot of different groups out there. Is there any difference in how you're approaching these different groups?

Frankie Miranda, Hispanic Federation CEO:

Absolutely, absolutely. And it has to come from community and it has to come from those people that have gone through so much in recent years that they have relied on institutions and organizations that are employers in communities, that they're the ones that are being feeding our community, providing the reliable information. So for each member of our community that is not a monolith, that we are truly diverse, we are incredibly rich in talent, but also in culture. That is why it is important that we have these organizations that are community-rooted and that they are the ones that are inviting people in and providing them with the services at the level and at the skill or the language that they require.

If I have been able to support you providing you with access to school for your children or managing healthcare for your elder people, I will be trusting you when you tell me this is an opportunity that you need to take in. This is what the future holds for quality jobs for our community. And if we don't do this, we're going to miss out because as you mentioned, by 2030, almost 80% of every new worker entering into the job market will be coming from the Latino community.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are there any organizations that you're working with now that you think are doing a really good job of getting to the heart of this in a community?

Frankie Miranda, Hispanic Federation CEO:

I think that the coalition that we have been able to build of 51 organization, 20 states and Puerto Rico are doing an extraordinary job. We know now that we have been able to place through this initiative more than 5,000 people and the median increase in their income had been around \$14,000 at the basic level. And those that have gone into tech have seen an increase of six figure salaries. So we know that it works. We know that it's being effective, but we need to make sure that not only we're taking care of the people that have been here for generations, but also there's an incredible opportunity for those newly arrived, those that have been asylum seekers, that have been exploited by many people and been shipped like cargo to buses to different kind of cities. We have an opportunity here because many of them are very skilled, very intelligent workers that are in the process of getting work permits. But after that, that's the first step into re-skilling them into the jobs in the United States and being able to re-certify them and give them the opportunity.

So there is a lot of work that needs to be done with organizations working with the newly arrived and those that have been here for generations. So we are working together and providing those opportunities for all Latinos, not just those that just have arrived or those that have been here for a long time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's an interesting point about the newly arrived, that a lot of them come with skills, but they don't have the credentials here. So is there any groups that you're working with that are really trying to fill that gap?

Frankie Miranda, Hispanic Federation CEO:

Right now with the Hispanic Federation providers, immigration providers, we are providing legal services and helping those asylum seekers to be able to get the work permit, but with a collaboration with Upwardly Global, we are going to start ... We already started working in three cities providing those that have received the work permits, the opportunity to be trained and re-skilled, to be able to start working

immediately. Getting the work permits, many people think that that is the solution for everything, but that is the beginning of a long journey. How do we make sure that these people that are wanting to work, that do not want to depend on the government, that they are in a situation in which they want to work, but they couldn't. Now that they have the work permits, that they can contribute to our economy and continue to make our economy grow.

And we know that our economy right now is the top of the world because of the migrant workers, the people that have been added to the workforce. And it has been already documented, it has been proven, and we need to continue that trend. We cannot allow many of these people to be trapped by the system in which they are being sent to places, they are relying on government resources, but they are not allowed to work. Let's get them to work and let's give them the skills to be able to contribute enormously as they want. And that is the American Dream that they are pursuing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And what's at stake here, both for our country and for the individual? If we do not address this now, how is that going to impact our economy?

Frankie Miranda, Hispanic Federation CEO:

We need to make this effort and ensure that all segments of our society are part of these master plan into the jobs of the future. In order for our economy to continue to be competitive in a global economy, we need to ensure that we are providing the education, the skills, and the opportunities for people to thrive. That's why it's so important that we do this for our community, for the Latino community in a culturally competent way, in a linguistically competent way, and with those people that really understand the community. So if we come together, we're going to be very, very successful in making sure that we're not leaving anyone behind. But at the same time, that the United States continues to be the most competitive economy in the world.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Also, at JFF Horizons, I sat down with Mauricio Garcia, Senior Vice President of Programs for UnidosUS, the largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the country. We discuss the role of nonprofits and the government in helping close the digital gap for Latinos, especially in rural America. For those of people don't know, tell them about UnidosUS. What do you do?

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

Sure. So we are the largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the country. We're committed to growing the wealth, fostering the health, and building the power of the Latino community. And we do so sort of three main ways. One is through our policy and advocacy efforts. So we work closely with folks in DC. We work closely with our affiliates on the ground, which I'll get to in a minute. And then the other arm of it is really programmatically, which is what I oversee. And so through our affiliates, which are over 300 in number, we collaborate with them to be able to implement, design and execute programs on the ground across four major issue areas. We have education, we have health, we have housing, and we have workforce development. And a through line to all of that work, on the policy side and the programmatic side is immigration. We've been working on this for many, many years as well as civic engagement. So you may know us from Get Out The Vote efforts and things of that nature.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And for WorkingNation, the workforce development and education closely tied, those are two key issues that we talk about. And with the Latino population, I believe the number is like 20% of the workforce now, but it's expected to be of the growth in the next, I think it's 5 years, it's going to be 78%. So how key is the Latino population to our economy?

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

Well, I think about it in two ways. One, just throwing out some numbers. In this decade alone, we will account for nearly 80% of new workers. If we look even further out, 2060, we will account for 30% of the workforce. So we know that we're helping power the economy, and we will do so even more as we look out.

And in terms of the education side, we know we have that pipeline. We're not just looking about who's working right now. We need to look and see who's coming after. So if we think about what we represent in education. Currently, we represent 1 in 4 students in K through 12, roughly 4 million folks. In higher education, we represent one in five. So there's a critically important opportunity to make sure that our students, our Latino students in early childhood education, in K through 12, and secondary, and post-secondary are cared for, programs are meeting them where they're at. And then there's specific tweaks, if you will, changes that are made in that system so that they are the workers of the future, not just the frontline folks, but folks in leadership and in executive leadership and in boardrooms. Because frankly, there are not enough Latinos in boardrooms and there's not enough Latinos in executive leadership.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's start with the overall workforce right now. There was a stat that I saw that said 57% of the Latino workforce and job seekers felt like they only had low to mediums digital skills. And with 92% of all jobs requiring digital skills, there's a really big disconnect. So how do we close that gap?

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

Investments in digital skilling. We've seen some of them. We've seen federal government play a role in it. There's more that federal government can do. We know that there's an area where employers, particularly big employers, have a big responsibility through whether it's registered apprenticeship programs that have the skilling component or other pre-apprenticeship programs. The collaboration, the sectoral partnerships, to be able to actually build that into the programming of a local community-based organization that may not have a registered apprenticeship program, but they're working with caregivers and families and their youth is embedding the digital skilling into those programs' initiatives. Oftentimes they don't exist. And part of it is because a lack of funding.

And so I don't want to go back to just being about money, but that's a big part of it. But it's also about how do we bring this up, raise the importance of digital skilling, using not just people in the know, because we're all in the workforce world. But how do we talk about it in terms of other entities? We're talking about how does someone actually navigate buying a home? You're going to need digital skilling because everything is online, and so it's all interconnected. So we're going to need more partners investing more dollars, investing more training to be able to embed that properly within programmatic [inaudible 00:14:17].

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We talk at WorkingNation a lot about opportunity and awareness. So how do you make a community aware? And I know all communities, the Latino population is not homogenous. It's not just one group of

people and it's not just one community. It's urban, it's rural, it's suburban. How do you make those different populations aware of what's out there?

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

Yeah, I use as example, I was just talking to someone in rural Arkansas where there's a large Mexican-American population, [inaudible 00:14:51] New York City, in Jackson Heights, Queens, which has every Latino country of origin you can imagine. Colombian, Ecuadorian, and they have different norms, and sometimes they might have looked to different folks to be able to share that information. So for us, the secret sauce is our local affiliates. So we have 308 local community-based organizations on the ground as the trusted messengers. They're providing education services, they're federally qualified health centers, they're charter schools, they're housing counseling agencies. So they already have those relationships. So we don't want to recreate the wheel. We're here. Most of us are here in DC, some of us are in other places. So we really rely on them to be the experts on the ground. The community expertise is what we rely on, so they help us disseminate that information.

And of course, there's other means. Obviously there's social media, there's platforms, but the first tool in our toolbox and our partners, are our affiliates, they're the ones that understand the challenges. They understand if the norms of the respective communities, because like you said, we're not a monolith. And so every community will be a little bit different.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I ran a panel here at JFF on closing that digital skills gap, and that was one of the key messages. Google.org works with Goodwill a lot on the Digital Skills Accelerator, but it is also different in each community. So what skills do you need? And that's where I think employers come in. So how are you getting employers involved in the skills development?

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

They're recognizing, I think there's an economic argument here because particularly around emerging industries, there need to be folks, workers who have certain skills who can fill the role of the job. And since like you said, the number, I think it was 97% required digital skilling. So there's an economic argument. And so that, we lead with that oftentimes because that obviously resonates. But then behind the scenes is, okay, so we have that economic argument. How can we be the trusted messenger to help support that pipeline of potential workers? And then streaming down into education as well, because it doesn't stop with just the workforce providers, the education, it's who supporting the parents and families. Because if we can get to the parents and families, then we can get to the youth, we can get to the high school students. So that's one way we're doing it.

The other part is, and sort of maybe going away from your question a little bit, is we also are working on broadband. So you mentioned rural communities. While we are tackling the digital skill in those communities, the bigger existential piece is they may not have internet still. They might not have the laptops, the devices. They might be sharing, I'm looking at my phone. They might be sharing a phone for a family of five, six, seven people as their only internet tool. So we're working with the providers to say, "Well, we need broadband and by the way, in order to be able to access that broadband and use it effectively, we need to have those digital skills." So there's an economic argument as well as just there's an existential argument that the world is moving forward talking about AI, but yet so many Latinos and communities of color and rural communities don't have the fundamentals, which is broadband.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We saw that really very clearly. I think during the pandemic when you'd see stories about people going to a library, so they could tap into the Wi-Fi using the parking lot, so they could use the Wi-Fi so they could get their kids' homework done. But like you said, if you have three kids on a laptop, you're there all night.

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

They're doing their homework on their phone.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, exactly. So another part of this I think is that workforce development issue. So how are you working with the local communities? How are you partnering with providers to make sure that there is the up-skilling?

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

If we had our way always, our approach would be around looking at the place and having a place-based approach. First, we can train as many Latinos as we want, but if there aren't opportunities that they're filling, if there isn't that supply of jobs, we're doing a disservice. And so we go into places and we do a labor market analysis. We understand, so that we understand, okay, what are the industries? What are the opportunities? What are the gaps? How might our local community-based organization affiliates help fill that? How can we convene? And that's not all. We also look at how is the higher education infrastructure. Increasingly, we just had a great conversation earlier about where does the K-12 infrastructure come into this? And then we think about, okay, so we know the different partners that play the ecosystem, and then after several months, we start to mobilize because we need to understand and discover first.

And then we can say, "Okay, we know that aviation in San Juan, Puerto Rico is an emerging industry and they need workers. And we have people we can train, but we will need these sort of tools in order to be able to do that." If we're in Denver, we know that the healthcare sector is huge, and so which one of our higher education partners are doing that? And how can we plug in and be able to actually train these folks and have registered apprenticeship programs around things? And the last thing I'll say is that that understanding is not in a vacuum. We can take that information, learn from it, and then replicate it with local context. And so that's how we're approaching our work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, I also think the K-12 is very important for career exploration. I've talked to other people about this point, the idea of that if you can't see it, you can't be it. So making people aware of what is out there. And then mentorship is very important too. I think getting someone who looks like you, whether for women having a woman in STEM come and talk to women or young girls and get them to understand, "Hey, there's a possible career for me." So would you say that's applicable to the Latino community too?

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

Yeah, and this goes back to our work as a civil rights organization where we work with our corporate partners big and small to make sure that if I'm a candidate and I'm in rural wherever it may be, that I see people that look like me and come from places like mine in those ranks. And so it may not even be like a mentorship program. It's just that you see and feel that there are people that are familiar. And so we

work hard to make sure that there's not just diversity because diversity is skimming the surface, that there's equity within organizations and within these contexts.

But it starts with making sure that practices that employers are using are culturally competent, that they're thinking about in terms of the cultural side, but as well as do you need a degree for that position? I know there's a lot of work that folks here are doing around skills-based practices, and so we lead with that as well. Not every organization is ready for that. Some employers are small. Some employers are like, "What does that mean? That's going to change everything." And so we need to be smart about it, and that's why we go in initially to understand what the dynamics are, what the needs are to be able to really set up the success for our participants.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I wouldn't say that it's only the Latino that may feel this way. Rural America feels this way and the idea of trust and finding a partner that you can trust, and not everybody trusts government. So that seems like it's a key issue when you go in and help. It's not ... Somebody use the phrase earlier, "Don't tell them what they need, ask them what they need."

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

And you mentioned the example of government. So we are a recipient of government funds, and it'd be one thing if federal government went straight to these communities because I think that trust piece is big, and there's also disinformation, misinformation that's rampant where we're trying to dispel. But for us, that's where we play a role. That's where our friends at the National Urban League or National Skills Coalition or all these sort of intermediaries, they're trusted in many ways. We have our network of affiliates. So there's that double layer of trust. So when they know that UnidosUS' nearly 60 years of civil rights advocacy, of all the work that we've been doing, there's that sense of relief and we have a track record, they can see it. And so that hedges against any sort of concerns or sort of hesitation communities might have.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Finally, when I went to Aspen Latino Society, one of the things that they talk about it is how much unrealized economic benefit is left on the table if you don't embrace and you don't upskill and bring up the quality of jobs for the Latino population. Just your thoughts on that.

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

I go back to the economic argument. We've been powering this country in many ways in the backs of many, and we will be needed for that for decades to come. But the talent that is in the Latino community is immense, and with a little bit of tender love and care, it can go to the next level. So I would say I agree.

But at the end of the day, while there is an economic argument and economic economic case, it's also about why Latinos come to this country in the first place. I hate to bring it to what's going on these days around the border, but folks aren't coming here ... They're coming out of desperation, and they know, because some of them might be doctors, some of them might be professionals in different ways, but they come here because they know they can still make a living, they know they can have that American Dream. But there's so much talent. That's all I'll say is that there's a lot of talent and it exists in every community, but the Latino community, there's a lot that can be done to really just fine tune it a little bit for us so that we can succeed even more.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Which reminds me of the thought that, as you said, there's doctors that are coming in. There's scientists. Somebody coming here because of whatever turmoil might be in another country, but they think I can make a living here. So that's talent, I feel like we're leaving on the table too.

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So it feels that there's got to be a way to help tap into that in a different way. And again, we don't talk so much about policy, but I know that's part of what your message is as well.

Mauricio Garcia, UnidosUS SVP of programs:

Part of this is we have so many DACA folks who've been here for decades who maybe their parents didn't come here as doctors and such. Maybe some did. But they've been educated, they've gone to two and four-year schools, but they haven't been able to get a job because of their documentation status. So we're leaving that on the table as well. There's a way of tapping into that. And so we've invested in immigrant legal services so that with all this bottleneck of folks applying for citizenship or their green card, we're helping providers on the ground, which is a workforce. There's a immigrant legal service workforce. So we're thinking about how do we make this more of a professionalized workforce? Do we make it a registered apprenticeship program? Because we're scratching each other's back by saying, "Okay, I'll support this workforce so that we can get more of this talent out there that can actually tap into these jobs that we need people for."

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was Mauricio Garcia, Senior Vice President of Programs for UnidosUS, and Frankie Miranda, President and CEO of Hispanic Federation. I spoke with them at the JFF Horizons Conference in July about ways of closing the Latino digital divide. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.